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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that teacher expectations can predict changes in student achievement and behavior. This Digest discusses the Pygmalion effect, or the idea that one's expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that conform to those expectations. Many teachers believe that they can judge ahead of time how certain students are likely, over time, to achieve and behave. The basis of a self-fulfilling prophesy (SFP) is that once a student has been pegged ahead of time, the chances are increased that a teacher's treatment of the student will help the negative prophecies or expectations come true. SFP can work to the detriment or benefit of the student, depending on the type of predictions and expectations. Teachers form expectations and assign labels based on such characteristics as body build, gender, race, ethnicity, name, attractiveness, dialect, and socioeconomic level. Different expectations lead to different treatments. Teachers convey expectations using four factors: climate, feedback, input, and output. The four factors can better be controlled if teachers are more aware that they are operating in the first place. Even if teachers do not truly feel that a student is capable of greater achievement or improved behavior, they should at least act as though they hold such heightened positive expectations. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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Good or Bad, What Teachers Expect from Students They Generally Get!

Robert T. Tauber

Most teachers know a little bit about the Pygmalion effect, or the idea that one's expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that confirm those expectations (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Everyone who has seen George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* or viewed the movie *My Fair Lady* remembers Eliza Doolittle's remarkable transformation, due to Professor Higgins' beliefs (i.e., expectations of her). Although first widely presented to educators in Rosenthal and Jacobson's *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968), few educators understand exactly how to use the Pygmalion effect or self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP) as a purposeful pedagogical tool to convey positive expectations and, maybe even more importantly, to avoid conveying negative expectations.

How many of you think that you are reasonably good judges of character? With years of teaching experience under your belt, are you more often than not able to size up students correctly? Occasionally you are wrong, but most often you are correct. Right? Many teachers believe that they can judge ahead of time, sometimes by just a glance the first day of school, how certain students are likely, over time, to achieve and behave.

Try the following exercise (Tauber, 1997). Pretend that you are not reading an article designed to make you more sensitive to the power of teacher expectations. Jot down the first descriptive thoughts that come to your mind when you think about the following kinds of people. Be honest. No one but you will see what you write.

Generally, what descriptors might you use to characterize:

- a teenager from a family that has strong and vocal Democratic (or Republican) Party ties;
- a significantly overweight teenage girl;
- a primary school student from an affluent family who is an only child;
- a middle school student whose two older siblings you had in class several years ago—each of whom was often a troublemaker;
- an Asian boy who is the son of a respected university math professor;
- a teenage boy who is thin, almost frail, and very uncoordinated for his age.

First Impressions Are Lasting Impressions

In spite of your best efforts to resist predictions regarding these students and their academic and/or behavioral future, did you catch yourself forming expectations—even fleetingly? If your answer is "yes," then the self-fulfilling prophecy probably is set in motion.

The basis of the SFP is that once a student has been pegged ahead of time as, say, a "troublemaker," "noscholar," or "likely to be self-centered," the chances are increased that our treatment of this student will, in effect, help our negative prophecies or expectations come true. Here the SFP would work to the detriment of the student. On the other hand, we could peg a student as "cooperative," "a scholar," or "likely to be a self-starter," thus increasing the chances that our treatment of him or her will convey these expectations and, in turn, contribute to the student living up to our original positive prophecy. In this case, the SFP would work to the student's benefit. Teachers, more often than not, get from students what they expect from them!

As a case in point, if you were a teacher and you had a student perform significantly better on a test than you would have predicted, would you look first at alternative reasons why this happened before admitting that you may have misjudged the child's capabilities? Would you be tempted to rescore the student's exam, believing that you must have made an error? Would you try to recall who was sitting next to this student when the test was administered and then check his or her exam for any all-too-obvious similarities in answers—i.e., the student in question must have cheated?

If, as Wagar claims, "The ultimate function of a prophecy is not to tell the future, but to make it" (1963, p. 66), then each time teachers size up or size down a student they are, in effect, influencing this student's future behavior and achievement. This is an awesome burden for educators to carry. The burden can be lessened if educators better understand the SFP and then remain diligent in trying to control it.

History and Mechanisms of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The term "self-fulfilling prophecy" was first coined by sociologist Robert K. Merton (1948). As part of his explanation of the SFP, Merton drew upon the theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928, p. 257).

The following five-step model explains how the SFP works:

- The teacher forms expectations.
- Based upon these expectations, the teacher acts in a differential manner.
- The teacher's treatment tells each student (loud and clear) what behavior and what achievement the teacher expects.
- If this treatment is consistent, it will tend to shape the student's behavior and achievement.
- With time, the student's behavior and achievement will conform more and more closely to that expected of him or her.

Because steps 3 through 5 are a repetition of steps 1 and 2, only the first two steps will be elaborated.

Teachers Form Expectations

Teachers form expectations—often during the very first day of school. If first impressions are lasting impressions, then some students are at a definite advantage, while still others are at a definite disadvantage.

What characteristics influence expectations? SFP research (Good, 1987) shows that teachers form expectations of and assign labels to people based upon such characteristics as body build, gender, race, ethnicity, given name and/or surname,

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attractiveness, dialect, and socioeconomic level, among others. Once we label a person, it affects how we act and react toward that person. "With labels, we don't have to get to know the person. We can just assume what the person is like" (Oakes, 1996, p. 11).

For instance, research (Brylinsky & Moore, 1994; Collins & Plahn, 1988) is clear that when it comes to a person's body build, mesomorphs, those with square, rugged shoulders, small buttocks, and muscular bodies are "better" than both ectomorphs, those with thin, frail-looking bodies, and endomorphs, those with chubby, stout, bodies with a central concentration of mass. Among other expectations, mesomorphs are predicted to be better fathers, more likely to assume leadership positions, be more competent doctors, and most likely to put the needs of others before their own.

With respect to attractiveness, the adage "beauty is good" prevails whether in storybooks or in real life. All things being equal, beautiful people are expected to be better employees—most likely to be hired, given a higher salary, and to advance more rapidly than their ugly-duckling counterparts. Beautiful people are perceived (expected) to make better parents, be better public servants, and be more deserving of having benefits bestowed upon them. The overall pattern of ascribing positive attributes to attractive people, including students, is the norm (Kenealy, Frude, & Shaw, 1988).

Finally, one's given name, often the first thing that we know about someone, can trigger expectations. Johnny Cash, in his song *A Boy Named Sue*, knew the power of expectations, and research confirms it. Certain social handicaps are thrust upon the child who carries a socially undesirable name. In the United States, primarily white, middle-class females continue to teach diverse student bodies that less and less resemble the teachers themselves—i.e., in color, race, ethnicity. When minority students, who by far possess the more unusual names (at least in the eyes of teachers), come to class, teachers cannot help but be influenced.

The self-fulfilling prophecy works two ways. Not only do teachers form expectations of students, but students form expectations of teachers—using the same characteristics described above (Hunsberger & Cavanagh, 1988).

Teachers Act on Expectations

Different expectations usually lead to different treatments. How does one person convey his or her expectations to another person? Rosenthal's Four-Factor theory, described in the often-recommended training video, *Productivity and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Pygmalion Effect* (CRM Films, 1987), identifies climate, feedback, input, and output as the factors teachers use to convey expectations.

Climate: the socioemotional mood or spirit created by the person holding the expectation, often communicated nonverbally (e.g., smiling and nodding more often, providing greater eye contact, leaning closer to the student).

Feedback: providing both affective information (e.g., more praise and less criticism of high-expectation students) and cognitive information (e.g., more detailed, as well as higher quality feedback as to the correctness of higher-expectation students' responses).

Input: teachers tend to teach more to students of whom they expect more.

Output: teachers encourage greater responsiveness from those students of whom they expect more through their verbal and nonverbal behaviors (i.e., providing students with greater opportunities to seek clarification).

These four factors, each critical to conveying a teacher's expectations, can better be controlled only if teachers are more aware that the factors are operating in the first place. Even if a teacher does not truly feel that a particular student is capable of greater achievement or significantly improved behavior, that teacher can at least ACT as if he or she holds such heightened positive expectations. Who knows, the teacher very well may be convincing to the student and, later, to himself or herself.

Conclusion

Longitudinal studies support the SFP hypothesis that teacher expectations can predict changes in student achievement and behavior beyond effects accounted for by previous achievement and motivation (Jussim & Eccles, 1992). Teachers who effectively use the self-fulfilling prophecy can, and should, help students become their own Pygmalions.

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